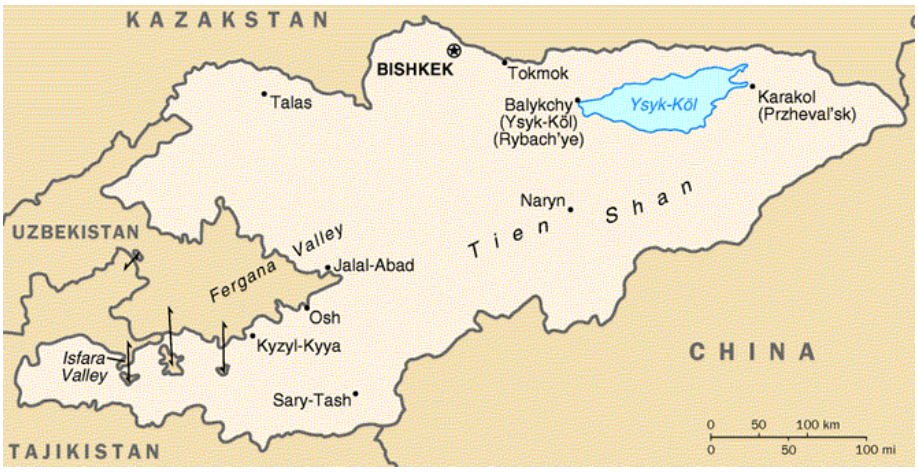
Kyrgyzstan

GEOGRAPHY



Kyrgyzstan covers 76,641 square miles, an area about the size of Minnesota. It is bordered to the north and northeast by Kazakhstan; to the west by Uzbekistan; to the south by Tajikistan; and to the southeast by China. Most of the country is mountainous, and Kyrgyzstan hosts the western part of the Tien Shan range. Two peaks from it form part of the Kyrgyzstan-Chinese border—one called *Pobeda* (which means "victory" in Russian) and the other Khan-Tengri. *Pobeda* is the second highest peak of the former Soviet Union.

Kyrgyzstan has wide, grassy, highland plains nestled within the Tien Shan mountains. In the northeast lies a large, clear salt lake called Issyk-Kul, or "hot water," because it never freezes. The only lowlands are found around the Chu and Talas rivers, to the southwest. Another large river, the Naryn, flows west across Kyrgyzstan and into the Ferghana Valley.

Kyrgyzstan's ten million sheep account for two-thirds of its animal husbandry income. In recent years, its economy has expanded to include cattle herding and farming in the Chu Valley, where sugar beets, orchards, and vineyards thrive. Cotton is grown in the Ferghana Valley, and tobacco is harvested in the Talas Valley. Kyrgyzstan also mines gold, mercury, and uranium. Hydroelectric stations in place along the Naryn River now supply electricity to most of the central Asian republics.

Kyrgyzstan has about 5.58 million inhabitants, and its capital, Bishkek (known as Frunze when Kyrgyzstan was part of the Soviet Union), is its largest metropolis, with a population of approximately 762,000. The population of Bishkek continues to increase faster than the rest of the country due to a large number of rural Kyrgyz who have moved to the capital seeking work. Legend holds that a tribe of Kyrgyz lived where Bishkek now stands. One member of the tribe, known for his skill and efficiency, was called Bishkek. When he died, his sons buried him near the road leading to the mountains, and thereafter the place was

called Bishkek. Other important cities include Osh, Jalal-Abad, Tokmak, and Przhevalsk. Bishkek and Osh are the only cities with more than 100,000 people.

HISTORY

The nomadic Kyrgyz tribes, from which the present peoples of Kyrgyzstan trace their ancestry, originated in the Yenisey Altai region of southern Siberia. Their frequent incursions into Chinese territory during the 3rdcentury BC earned them a reputation as fierce warriors, and they caught the attention of Chinese chroniclers. Some of these nomadic peoples moved westward into central Asia, where they established the Kyrgyz khanate in the 6th century AD, and lived there together with Scythian tribes that had settled the area centuries earlier. The khanate reached the zenith of its power and size in the tenth century and boasted a flourishing economy. Its traders traveled routes from Persia to China.

The Mongol Golden Horde conquered the independent Kyrgyz khanate in the 14th century, initiating a lengthy period of foreign rule. This subjugation lasted for two centuries, until the Kyrgyz won back their independence in 1510. Freedom lasted for only a few generations, as succeeding waves of invaders—the Kalmyks, Manchus, and Uzbeks—overran Kyrgyz lands. By the end of the 18th century, the Kyrgyz were actively seeking protection from their more powerful neighbor to the north, Russia. After losing several wars with the Uzbek Kokand khanate between 1845 and 1873, Kyrgyz' hopes to be rid of the Uzbek yoke became reality. In 1876, Russian armies defeated the Uzbeks and occupied Kyrgyzstan.

The Russian occupation marked the beginning of a period of integration and russification for the Kyrgyz. The Russians built a succession of forts—the Orenburg Line—to garrison troops that could be used to crush any rebellions by the khanates and to serve as bases for military expeditions against neighboring tribes. Russia offered incentives to get Cossacks and settlers to establish farmland and work in mines and induced a large number of Russians to migrate to Kyrgyzstan. Engineers constructed roads, schools, and housing for these immigrants in areas where local populations were largely Russian. Although few Kyrgyz benefited at that time from the improved infrastructure, the rural-to-urban migration that would take place under Soviet rule meant that Kyrgyz would have access to education and health care—many for the first time.

Imperial Russia viewed Kyrgyzstan as a colony; its population, aided by Russian and Cossack settlers, provided cheap labor to exploit the territory for the raw natural resources required by Russian industry. It also provided a ready market for manufactured goods, which could be sold for huge profits. The local anger over confiscation of land and heavy taxation, however, boiled over in 1916, when the tsar instituted universal conscription in an attempt to replace the heavy losses the Russian Imperial Army suffered in the first two years of World War I. Riots broke out, and both sides committed terrible acts of violence. After several hundred Russian civilians were killed in a mob attack, a Cossack army rode through the countryside, destroying villages and slaughtering their inhabitants. Local scholars claim this repression, which lasted from 1916 to 1917, to be the worst period in Kyrgyz history and to have cost the lives of fully one-quarter of the total Kyrgyz population.

A group of Russian settlers, facing little opposition from the scattered native tribes, formed the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan (CPK) in 1918. That same year, Kyrgyzstan became part of the

Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and, in 1926, it became an autonomous republic. The Kyrgyz language was introduced alongside Russian in schools in the 1920s as part of the Bolshevik program to achieve universal literacy in the Soviet Union. Use of Arabic script and the Kyrgyz language were soon considered anti-revolutionary, and many members of the intelligentsia and any others who expressed dissent were imprisoned or executed. The Russian-dominated CPK purged Kyrgyz members from its ranks during the show trials of 1937-1938.

The realities of nomadic life on the steppe did not lend themselves to proletarianization. After World War II, Moscow made sure that an ethnic Kyrgyz held the figurehead position of First Secretary of the CPK, but Kyrgyz membership in the Party remained low, barely matching that of the Russian minority.

With the general loosening of controls in the late 1980s, ethnic conflict between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks flared into violence. The southern province of Osh, which borders Uzbekistan, has a large Uzbek population that wanted autonomy for the province. If granted, it would have enabled Osh to secede from Kyrgyzstan and join Uzbekistan. (Although a 1989 census determined that only 13 percent of the population of Kyrgyzstan was Uzbek, almost all of these people lived in Osh province.) The problem within that province concerned the division of land: local Uzbeks were competing with Kyrgyz for property. In summer 1990, bloody riots broke out, and martial law was declared to restore order. These riots occurred while the Soviet Union was edging closer to collapse and hastened the formation of a democratic opposition to communist power in Kyrgyzstan.

POLITICS

During the Soviet period, most of Kyrgyzstan was off-limits to visitors from non-communist countries. The Kyrgyz had no voice in international affairs or domestic policy, but were one of the first peoples to declare independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in Moscow. Today, Kyrgyzstan faces many political, social, and economic challenges.

The flag of Kyrgyzstan

Askar Akayev was elected president of Kyrgyzstan in 1991, and was the only central Asian leader who was not a professional Communist politician during the Soviet era. His first career was in academia, although he did have ties to the Communist Party, like most prominent people of that period. Kyrgyzstan's reputation as the most democratic central Asian country was partially diminished in 1994 and 1995, when government-sanctioned assaults on freedom of information and a prolonged power struggle between the president and the Communist-dominated Parliament weakened its emerging democratic image. In response to subsequent calls for his resignation, President Akayev set up a referendum on his leadership in 1995. In an overwhelming show of support, 96 percent voted in favor of the President finishing his term, with voter turnout estimated at over 95 percent. Akayev interpreted this as a public vote of confidence in both his leadership and efforts at reform, and, in a February 1996 referendum, he was granted even more executive power. His Security Council wielded the authority to resolve domestic policy issues, and changes in the country's political structure increased his control of local government.

The ethnic composition of Kyrgyzstan is 65 percent Kyrgyz, 12.5 percent Russian, and 14 percent Uzbek. The remainder is made up of Ukrainians, Germans, Uighurs, and a variety of other nationalities. Most of the Russian population lives in urban centers. Kyrgyzstan suffers from uneven development between the northern and southern parts of the country. The south complains that the distribution of resources and aid favors the north. In 1995, in response to these accusations, the President undertook a high-profile tour of the south, at which time he promised to end any injustices in resource allocations. President Akayev was sensitive to divisions in his country, whether ethnic, economic, or political, because he was aware of how volatile such splits have been in the past and in the region in general.

The spring 2000 parliamentary elections—while relatively open—were tainted by evidence of government interference. While, on the whole, there was improvement since the 1995 elections, including allowing the presence of international election observers, the courts were used to arbitrarily manipulate and intimidate candidates and the electorate. Immediately after the elections, for example, Felix Kulov, an opposition candidate, was jailed under questionable circumstances. The international community has been vocal in its criticism of the government in relation to such occurrences, and the situation continues to spark interest by media watchdog and human rights groups.

In 1999 and 2000, Kyrgyzstan experienced a rise in Islamic radical activity, most notably incursions made by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU has been included on the U.S. Government's official list of terrorist organizations. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Kyrgyzstan built strong ties with the U.S.-led coalition, which established an airbase at Manas airport near the capital of Bishkek. In November 2002, Akayev agreed to allow Russia to establish an airbase on Kyrgyz territory, as well. While the Manas Air Base (now the Transit Center at Manas) continues to be a controversial topic in Kyrgyzstan, Manas continues to play a key role in transporting and supplying U.S.- and NATO-led soldiers, as well as numerous aid workers in Afghanistan.

While Akayev raised his profile with the U.S. and abroad, the country's domestic situation continued to worsen. Journalists accused the government of restoring censorship by passing harsh "state secret laws," that prohibited discussion of such things as price increases, livestock deaths, and road conditions. The president accused the media of irresponsible reporting and of inciting political and inter-ethnic conflicts. However, in many ways, Kyrgyzstan was less troubled by ethnic tensions than several other former Soviet republics. Despite constraints, the country is home to a large array of non-governmental organizations and has maintained a tolerance for opposition and dissent that was unmatched in the rest of Central Asia.

This tolerance allowed for increasingly visible public protests. In March 2002, there were violent clashes between protesters and police. Kyrgyz citizens protested a controversial border pact with China and the jailing of opposition figures. (The government ceded nearly 100,000 hectares of territory of China.) Six demonstrators were killed in street clashes with police, causing a public outcry and forcing some members of the President's cabinet to resign in May 2002. Some opposition politicians managed to associate themselves with the anti-Akayev movements, but the opposition itself was deeply divided. Akayev was unpopular, but expected to serve out his term; there was no universally-accepted alternative.

Tensions between Akayev and an opposition without much unity continued to grow towards the parliamentary elections of February and March 2005. Opposition figures such as Kurmanbek Bakiyev (a former Prime Minister), Roza Otunbaeva (a former Foreign Minister), and Felix Kulov (a popular opposition political figure who was in jail) could not come together as a united block to effectively mount a unified challenge to Akayev, as the opposition movements in Georgia and Ukraine had done in 2003 and 2004. This gave little cohesion to the protests that erupted across the county in 2005 in response to the parliamentary elections in which it was widely held that Akayev and his allies committed massive fraud and vote-rigging. Large-scale protests began at the end of March in the southern, more Uzbek-dominated part of the country, and there were reports of casualties in clashes between protesters and government security forces. By March 24, the unrest had reached Bishkek, and the many protesting groups seemed to have rallied behind Bakiyev and Otunbaeva.

This nominal unity did not translate into unity among the protesters on Bishkek's streets, however, and the capital was taken over by two days of chaotic looting and occasional gunfire. At the same time, groups of mostly youthful protesters occupied government buildings, and that very day, Akayev and his family fled to Kazakhstan, and later to Moscow. The newly-elected parliament took the place of the old one, and on March 25 declared Bakiyev to be acting Prime Minister and President. Felix Kulov, released from jail with the support of dissenting security services and probably the most popular opposition figure in the country, appealed on television for calm and for the country to support the new government. New presidential elections were held in July, and by tapping into the popular support held by Kulov, Bakiyev was elected president with 89 percent of the vote, and named Kulov his prime minister.

Bakiyev assumed office accompanied by high hopes that he would limit the powers of the presidency, fight governmental corruption, and help to democratize an economy whose major firms remained under the control of oligarchs linked to Akayev. While some economic reform occurred, and while Bakiyev signed a decree in 2007 limiting his own powers as president, his initial popularity diminished due to the overall slow pace of reform. His reputation was further tarnished by the murders of several prominent politicians since 2005, followed by the lackluster investigations into those crimes. Prime Minister Kulov resigned in December 2006, and allied himself with the opposition to the Ak Jol Party of President Bakiyev. There were large anti-Bakiyev demonstrations in 2007 in Bishkek, and more unrest in 2008. The suspicious death in March 2009 of Medet Sadyrkulov, a former head of the presidential administration who had fallen out with Bakiyev, further stoked popular resentment of the government.

In February 2009, after receiving a $2.15 billion aid package from Russia, Bakiyev announced that Kyrgyzstan would not renew the U.S. lease for the Transit Center at Manas. The base was a major annoyance to the Russians, who long considered Central Asia under their geopolitical influence. However, in June 2009, Bakiyev agreed to allow the U.S. to stay after offering an increase in the rent payment for the Manas base to $60 million. Concurrently, Bakiyev appointed his son Maxim as head of the newly created Central Agency for Development, Investment, and Innovation, which subsequently took control over vast swaths of the Kyrgyz economy.

Presidential elections were scheduled to be held in 2010, in keeping with the constitution of 2003, which grants the president a five-year term. However, the Kyrgyz Constitutional Court ruled in March 2009 that Bakiyev's term would end in October. Bakiev was re-elected in July 2009 in an election widely criticized by international observers as fraudulent.

In the winter of 2010, Kyrgyzstan experienced widespread blackouts, and the cost of public utilities skyrocketed. Several Kyrgyz news outlets were shut down, and several journalists were killed and beaten. Kyrgyz-Russian relations deteriorated after the Kremlin criticized how the first payment of its aid package was used, leading Moscow to delay its investment package for a new hydroelectric station. Moscow was also incensed over reports that huge fuel contracts were being manipulated by the Bakiyev clan and that fuel from Russia was being re-sold at international rates to the U.S. air base and other suppliers.

On April 1, Russia terminated preferred custom duties on its gasoline and diesel exports, causing fuel prices to rise sharply. Political observers saw the move as retaliation for Bakiyev's reversal on closing the U.S. Manas base after receiving Moscow's promised aid package. Concurrently, popular Russian television news programs began airing critical reports on Bakiyev's regime. Given Russia's proximity to Kyrgyzstan, these programs were available to Kyrgyz viewers. The Kyrgyz government responded by blocking the channel signals.

On April 6, 2010, protestors in the city of Talas stormed the government administration office and took the governor hostage. Protests also began outside other regional government offices. On April 7, after three leaders of the political opposition—Omurbek Tekebayev, Temir Sariev, and Almaz Atambayev—were arrested, crowds swelled outside the White House, the residence of the Kyrgyz President, calling for their release. Eventually, protestors stormed the building, and snipers on the White House roof opened fire, killing 89 people.

Bishkek police left the streets, and for 36 hours, countless offices and businesses were looted and burned, including numerous government buildings. Bakiyev fled to his home village in the southern region of Jalalabad, where it was widely suspected that he was planning to raise a militia to return to Bishkek and resume the presidency. Bakiyev refused to step down as president until the new interim government announced that it would issue arrest warrants for him and his family if he did not resign. While he attempted to gather support in Osh, a crowd of anti-Bakiyev protesters charged the pro-Bakiyev rally. Bakiyev's bodyguards fired into the air to disperse the crowd, and Bakiyev was whisked away. Shortly thereafter, it was reported that Bakiyev had fled to Kazakhstan, and then to Belarus. He submitted his official resignation as president of Kyrgyzstan on April 16, 2010, yet maintains that the revolution that overthrew him was illegal.

Roza Otunbaeva, a long-standing opposition figure in Kyrgyz politics, and others joined together to form an interim government, vowing to initiate elections in the nearest future. The interim government sought support from regional leaders throughout the country, however, many of the leadership positions in the south remained loyal to Bakiyev. Throughout May 2010, ethnic tensions between the ethnic Kyrgyz Bakiyev supporters and largely apolitical Uzbek population rose, as Uzbek leaders lobbied the interim government for greater representation in the new government.

Ostensibly resulting from a nightclub altercation, clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek youths on June 10, 2010 flared into four days of widespread ethnic violence in the cities of Osh and Jalalabad. Nearly 500 people were killed, and local ethnic Kyrgyz political leaders and criminal organizations were blamed for contributing to the systematic destruction of Uzbek neighborhoods and businesses. Conversely, Uzbek leaders were blamed for instigating the violence with their overtures to the interim government for greater representation and autonomy. Nevertheless, the vast majority of victims from the violence were ethnic Uzbek, and individuals subsequently arrested and tried have been Uzbek. The trials have been strongly criticized by international observers as being unfair, with

defendants and their lawyers threatened outside the courts by victim's family members and with confessions often having been coerced through torture.

The interim government promised to eliminate corruption and restore faith in the government. Many Kyrgyz citizens were understandably cautious, as previous governments had made similar claims. A referendum on a new constitution establishing Kyrgyzstan as the first Central Asian parliamentary democracy passed in the weeks shortly after the southern ethnic violence.

The interim government kept its promise to hold national elections in a timely fashion, and parliamentary elections were held on October 2010. In December 2011, Almazbek Atambayev was elected President of Kyrgyzstan with 63 percent of the vote. Elections were considered to be generally fair, and through the peaceful transition of power, Kyrgyzstan has again set itself on the path of democracy.

ECONOMY

Kyrgyzstan's economy slipped into a severe recession as a result of the disruption of ties with the rest of the former Soviet republics following the breakup in 1991. At the height of the dismal economic situation, many industrial enterprises were either closed or barely operating. As unemployment grew, the social safety net proved inadequate. Although foreign donors offered loans and other forms of assistance as a show of support for President Akayev's attempts at modernizing and westernizing Kyrgyzstan, they could not offset the effects of the nation's severe economic difficulties.

In May 1993, Kyrgyzstan became the first central Asian state to introduce its own national currency, the *som*—a move strongly encouraged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Foreign loans continue to be made to Kyrgyzstan. As a member of the World Bank since September 1992, Kyrgyzstan received approximately $621 million in loans to facilitate restoration of its economic growth in the 1990s; undertake legal reforms to support the emerging private sector; mitigate poverty; protect vulnerable segments of society during the transition; and strengthen the management of public finance. This is in spite of the fact that Kyrgyzstan has not made as much progress towards privatization as western economists had hoped.

Because of economic hardship, many tens of thousands of non-Kyrgyz have emigrated, many of whom are Russians and whose technical and administrative skills were essential for the functioning of the Kyrgyz state. To stop this drain, the government attempted to build confidence among the non-Kyrgyz population to encourage them to remain in the country. First, it established Russian as a second official language to discourage further Russian out-migration. Second, Akayev signed a treaty with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia in 1996 to form a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) customs union which, though largely symbolic, strengthened ties to Moscow, as well as several other former republics. Germany also offered substantial aid to Kyrgyzstan to encourage the country's German-speaking minority to remain in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan is still a primarily agricultural economy, with 48 percent of the population directly engaged with agriculture. Cotton, tobacco, wool, and meat are the largest agricultural products, and there is very little heavy industry, with the next largest segment of the population employed in the service sector. Finished industrial products are mostly imported, primarily from Russia but more and more from China and Kazakhstan. For most of the past decade, Kyrgyzstan's economy grew quite

quickly, and in 2007-2008, a high point, grew at a rate of six percent per year. This growth diminished significantly as the world economy struggled post-2008, and in 2010 was estimated to be shrinking at a rate of approximately 1.5 percent. In terms of GDP, Kyrgyzstan's largest export is gold (followed by cotton), and higher commodity prices for gold, mercury, and uranium helped to spur this higher rate of economic growth. It is unclear how Kyrgyzstan will emerge from the current international economic crisis, but lower commodity prices are expected to hit the economy quite hard by drastically reducing the amount the government receives in tax revenue.

Unemployment and the availability of electricity are key economic concerns in Kyrgyzstan. The increase in the cost of electricity over the past decade, as well as neglect of the electricity-generating infrastructure, means that Bishkek's citizens endure periodic blackouts. Russia plays a large role in the Kyrgyz economy by delivering fossil fuels to Kyrgyzstan (at prices set by Moscow), and by absorbing close to 500,000 Kyrgyz migrant laborers. Even with a large number of Kyrgyz working in Russia, primarily in the construction and municipal sectors, Kyrgyz unemployment stands at near nine percent for 2010, the last year for which statistics are available.

Kyrgyzstan has taken several steps towards fighting corruption. In February 2003, it adopted a new constitution to promote democratic processes. The President has established a Council on Conscientious Governance, whose task is to promote a code of ethics among government employees. Kyrgyzstan has also established a country-wide examination process for graduating high school students, aimed at taking the corruption and subjectivity out of college admissions. The system of objective, western-style university admissions exams is the first in the region. But as seen above, many Kyrgyz are not satisfied with the overall pace of government reforms, and the economic shock following the financial crisis of 2008-2009 further destabilized the political situation.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Kyrgyzstan is a small country surrounded by larger and more powerful neighbors (Russia, China, and Kazakhstan) who exert a great deal of influence on Kyrgyzstan's foreign relations. Since 1996, Kyrgyzstan has been a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the other members being Russia, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The organization is not a military bloc, per se, but was founded to ensure the cooperation of military forces in the border regions of the countries involved. To this day, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have outstanding border delineation disputes. The SCO holds annual meetings of their heads of state and the government, and more frequent meetings of foreign ministers and military personnel. Over the past decade, the SCO has gradually increased its military cooperation by holding joint military exercises in both Russia and Kazakhstan. The SCO has also begun to influence social and cultural exchange and integration, sponsoring meetings of Ministers of Culture and even inaugurating a series of art and culture festivals.

The geographical location of Kyrgyzstan thrust the country into the forefront of the war in Afghanistan. Soon after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Kyrgyz and U.S. governments reached an agreement whereby the U.S. would lease part of the Manas International Airport near Bishkek to use as a forward base for U.S. and NATO forces headed south towards Afghanistan. After the closure in 2005 of a U.S. airbase in southern Uzbekistan, the airbase at Manas was the most visible sign of the increased U.S. presence and influence in former-Soviet Central Asia.

The airbase has frequently been a point of conflict between the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan, as well as a sticking point between the U.S. and Russia. In April 2006, Kurmanbek Bakiyev insisted that the U.S. pay more to lease the airfield in the future, or U.S. and NATO troops would be expelled from the country. Bakiyev eventually withdrew his threat, but whether to continue the lease remains a political discussion in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz popular resentment towards the base has grown due to a number of incidents, including the shooting death of a Kyrgyz citizen by a U.S. guard. In February 2009, Russia offered Kyrgyzstan a much larger aid package than the U.S. generally paid, and citing the undiminished popular resentment of the airbase, Bakiyev announced that the base must be closed within 180 days. Ultimately Bakiyev reached an agreement to let the U.S. stay at Manas, incurring the wrath of the Russian government, which felt that Bakiyev had failed to maintain its promises to Russia. Hence, when Bakiyev's administration began to fall in the face of opposition, the Russian government was among the first to recognize the interim government.

Subsequent Kyrgyz governments have affirmed their wish to have the U.S. depart the base at Manas. Kyrgyzstan finds itself in a difficult position vis-à-vis Russia, its powerful neighbor to the north, the U.S. as a benefactor, and China, which plays an important role in the Kyrgyz economy.

RELIGION

The Kyrgyz are a Turko-Mongolian people who are predominantly Sunni Muslim. While most Kyrgyz are secular Muslim, several religions are practiced widely and most people are tolerant of various religious beliefs. The two major branches of Islam are the Sunni, which forms the majority of Muslims, and the Shi'a. Most of the Islamic population of the former Soviet Union is Sunni Muslim. The religion's founding is conventionally dated to 610 AD, by the Prophet Muhammad, who is its central figure. He preached the word of God as revealed to him by the angel Gabriel. Islam is the Arabic word for submission; those who practice it are called Muslims, or "those who submit" (to God). The *sunna*, the "saying and doings" of Muhammad, serves as a guide to spiritual, ethical, and social life, and consists of the Qur'an (Koran), a compilation of the word of God spoken to Muhammad, and the *hadith*, the saying and teachings of the Prophet.

Traditionally, Muslims practice what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam: reciting the creed, praying daily, giving alms, fasting, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Prayer is practiced five times a day, facing Mecca, and Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Islam accepts what its adherents are able to practice under given circumstances, which allowed Muslims to adapt to the restrictions Soviets placed on religion.

When worshipping, men typically pray together at a mosque, while women pray at home. Women are allowed to worship in mosques, but must do so in areas separate from men. The ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar year is Ramadan, when adherents fast during daylight hours, but may eat after the sun goes down. (Neither children nor the sick are expected to participate in this ritual.)

Twenty percent of the population identifies itself as Russian Orthodox. The Russian Orthodox Church came into being after the Kievan Prince Vladimir chose Byzantine Christianity for his kingdom. The Russian Orthodox Church retained its ties to the Byzantine Church, both in terms of liturgy and hierarchy after the Great Schism of 1054 between the Eastern and Western Churches. The number of Orthodox in Kyrgyzstan includes almost all of the ethnic Russians, as well as a small percentage of ethnic Kyrgyz. The Russian Orthodox Church maintains only 46 parishes in Kyrgyzstan, almost all of which are located in urban centers, primarily in Bishkek. Since the collapse

of the Soviet Union, several Protestant missionary groups have worked in Kyrgyzstan, and while the number of Protestants in Kyrgyzstan is increasing, their percentage of the overall population is still small.

CULTURE

In the period after 840 AD, the Kyrgyz—joining many other groups settled in the area extending from the Tien Shan to the Tarim River basin—underwent a process of turkification, which lasted for more than two centuries. The Kyrgyz tribes became mixed with other tribes and eventually absorbed Turkic cultural and linguistic habits and characteristics. The modern Kyrgyz language did not have a written form until 1923, at which time an Arabic-based alphabet was used. That was changed to a Latin alphabet in 1928 and then to Cyrillic in 1940. The majority of the population is bilingual (Kyrgyz and Russian), with English very popular, particularly among young people.

Well before the Kyrgyz had an orthographic system, they possessed a rich folklore tradition in which legends, stories, and songs were orally passed down. The most notable is the Kyrgyz epic, "Manas," the story of a warrior who defended Kyrgyzstan from foreign invaders, which is composed of over a million lines of verse, and is said to be the longest epic poem in the world. "Manas" is unique because there was no written language before 1923, and it was passed from generation to generation orally for more than 900 years. *Manaschy*, the tellers of "Manas," memorize this long text and perform it for their listeners. UNESCO declared 1995 the year of "Manas," in celebration of the epic poem's 1000th anniversary.

Kyrgyzstan's traditional musical instrument is the three-stringed *komuz,* now made of wood, but many years ago, made from the inner organs of sheep. It contributes greatly to the unique sound of Kyrgyz folk music. A traditional piece of clothing still worn by old and young is a woolen cap, called a *kalpak,* which protects them from the cold in winter and the heat in summer. In rural areas, older people and married women wear clothing that combines western and traditional styles.

Soccer and ice hockey are the most popular sports broadcast on television. A traditional game played in Kyrgyzstan is *ulak tartysh,* which means "goatball." The rules are similar to American football, except the ball is made from the full body of a goat (without the head), and players ride horses. This game is played in different forms in several Central Asia countries.

Connection to mass media in Kyrgyzstan depends on geographical location. There are eight state-owned television stations in Kyrgyzstan, two of which are national and six of which are regional. The national state-run stations offer a mixture of programming in Russian and in Kyrgyz. The editorial content of these broadcasts has been increasingly criticized in recent years by opposition groups who point to incidents of government censorship, and to a more broad culture of self-censorship in the independent press in order to avoid legal altercations with the government. There are areas of the country, however, where television reception is poor at best, especially in the Tien Shan mountains. Local stations can broadcast in either Russian or Kyrgyz, and in the south offer some programming in Uzbek. There are around 20 private television stations, which primarily distribute Russian and foreign-produced material with either dubbing or subtitles. In 2011, an estimated 39 percent of Kyrgyzstan citizens were Internet users, with just over 75,000 Facebook users.

Popular dishes include *beshparmak,* which means "five fingers," as it is eaten without utensils. It is made of noodles and ground lamb with a slightly spicy sauce. *Oromo* is a popular dish, especially in rural areas, consisting of shredded potatoes, onions, and carrots, which are rolled onto pastry and then steamed. *Shashlyk*, or grilled meat kebabs (usually lamb or beef) are as popular in Kyrgyzstan as they are throughout Central Asia. Kyrgyz also eat a variety of Russian and Uzbek dishes, such as *pelmeni, plov,* and *lagman*. Kyrgyz love to eat lamb, which is often spiced with pepper, onions, and coriander. Particular cuts or portions of meat are normally parceled out according to family hierarchy.

June 2012